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Star Wars – Episode I: The Phantom Menace (1999) / Episode II: Attack of the Clones (2002) / Episode III: Revenge of the Sith (2005)

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Director/Coscreenwriter: George Lucas

By Roderick Heath

The fervent anticipation at the nearing release of *Star Wars – Episode VII: The Force Awakens* carries an unavoidable sensation of déjà vu. Like just about everyone else my age, I grew up watching the original *Star Wars* trilogy, and recall another wave of both powerful hype and real expectation through the closing months of the last millennium that crested with the release of George Lucas' return to the series, *Star Wars – Episode I: The Phantom Menace*. This cinematic phenomenon began as a good-humoured, referential piece of space disco created by Lucas, a man who up until 1977 had been best known for a film about teens driving about all night to the musical accompaniment of '50s oldies. But the series he inaugurated with *Star Wars – Episode IV: A New Hope* (1977) quickly became something rare: giant blockbusters viewers adopted with the fierce personal attachment of cult films. Stripped down to constituent parts, the original *Star Wars* films seem simple, even infantile, and yet there's something incredibly powerful encoded in them, defying reduction if not dissection. Almost inimitable amongst modern special-effects-driven movies,

they maintain the rarefied quality of fable, combining cheeky but essentially straitlaced heroism with a quality, in their evocations of places seen and visited, their alien cities dancing on clouds and death machines the size of moons and taverns littered with denizens of two dozen species, that resembles the apparatus of dreaming.

Concurrent with the fond eagerness was a quieter but powerful swell of cynicism from people who disliked the films or resented the hype. *Star Wars* had germinated as personal fantasia but became marketing event. Lucas began his career with the semi-experimental scifi feature *THX 1138* (1971), but more than any other filmmaker of his generation—the so-called Movie Brats—Lucas came to exemplify faith in the broad audience's wont as well

as the artisan-artist's individual vision. Lucas learnt the hard way about the pitfalls as well as the prospects in making movies for that audience by dealing with the uproar over the nightmarish *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) and the flop of the oddball *Howard the Duck* (1986), and had resolved to be a responsible provider of family entertainment. Facing a new trilogy with much darker and less commercial subject matter than his first series, Lucas at first courted a new generation of young viewers as fans, but he left many feeling he conceded to those young folk excessively. The people who already loved *Star Wars* certainly weren't kids anymore. They were 20- and 30-somethings who wanted, whether they knew it or not, two completely divergent yet equally necessary sensations: the feeling of being thrust back to childhood even whilst simultaneously acknowledging their evolution. *The Matrix*, released a few months before *The Phantom Menace*, became the film the latter singularly refused to be, a superman fantasy dressed up in pseudo-grit and cyberpunk quotes that fitted the mood of the time. *The Phantom Menace* was a huge hit, but soon became a byword for the cultural equivalent of a fumbled touchdown. That said, I was and still am bewildered by the level of invective the prequel trilogy receives. In some ways, I even

prefer those films today.

I don’t say this just for the sake of contrariness. Some criticism levelled at the trilogy is legitimate and feelings of dashed expectations are honest enough for many. But I also feel this cult of disdain exemplified something notably obnoxious about the dawning age of the internet, a deeply spoiled capacity to judge with distinction or consider with a sense of history that refers outside of the bubble of fandom, or the opposite, charmless snootiness turned on popular cinema. I think of how lumbering and over-hyped a lot of modern franchises have proven over a stretch of ground—*The Dark Knight*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Transformers* and *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games* series, even to a certain extent the Marvel superhero films. So many are testimonies to a brand of professional

smoothness or an anodyne brand of fun, rarely taking any risks or offering real ambition to match their flimsy gravitas. Peter Jackson's Tolkien adaptations, formidable as they are, rendered the epic and the fantastic in a manner that remains resolutely concrete, sapped of relevance as parable, and the more they try for the ethereal, the less they seem. So I've found myself returning often to the colour and expansive glee apparent in even the least of the *Star Wars* movies. There's real beauty and great invention to be found in the prequel trilogy. At their best, they exemplify the creed of the project as it began to explore complicated ideas and motifs through apparently cheery and unpretentious figurations. Lucas had originally drawn on nearly a century's worth of space opera scifi and pulp storytelling as well as more serious sources.

The surprising thing about *The Phantom Menace* is how well Lucas captures the tone of some of the stuff he alludes to—the broad, tony, featherweight *joie de vivre* of a Saturday afternoon adventure film by someone like Nathan Juran or Richard Thorpe. People wanted the *Star Wars* prequels to be about their childhoods, but the series remained, in utterly crucial ways, an account of Lucas' youth. One definite impact upon my own sense of art and artistry I can say the series had was the way it introduced me to the idea of auteurist cinema. George Lucas *was Star Wars*; even when he wasn't directing, his influence was still all over the product. This eventually proved a sword with two edges, as Lucas the creator became the boogeyman of fanboy campfire tales.

The overarching story of the prequel trilogy is straightforward, but

also much more complex in its dimensions and ramifications than the original trilogy's. The trilogy depicts the transformation of the Galactic Republic, an ancient, galaxy-spanning alliance of planets, into a fascistic Empire. Palpatine (Ian McDiarmid), a devotee of the once hugely powerful but long since toppled mystic society called the Sith, is at first a mere senator from the planet of Naboo. He engineers a plot in multiple stages, first leveraging himself into the chancellorship of the Republic Senate by creating a crisis between his home world and a cabal of smug, fish-faced aliens called the Trade Federation, led by Nute Gunray (Silas Carson). Palpatine then foments a full-scale civil war between Republic loyalists and disaffected groups, using his adherent and accomplice Count Dooku (Christopher Lee) to manipulate events until he is given dictatorial powers, permitting him to create a full-scale army of clones to control his domain. Then Palpatine moves to wipe out the Jedi, the Republic peacekeepers who adhere to an antipathetic philosophy to the Sith whilst drawing on the same quasi-spiritual energy source known as the Force.

Woven into the fabric of his plot are three core characters: the elected Queen and later Senator of Naboo, Padmé Amidala (Natalie Portman), Jedi knight Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor), and his pupil Anakin Skywalker (played as a kid by Jake Lloyd, as a man by Hayden Christensen). *The Phantom Menace* tells how Obi-Wan and mentor Qui-Gon Jinn (Liam Neeson) save Padmé and aid her in reconquering Naboo from the Federation. They encounter young Anakin by chance when hiding out on the remote, barbaric desert planet Tatooine, where he and his mother Shmi (Pernilla August) are slaves to gruff, sleazy trader Watto (Andrew Secombe). Anakin's uniquely powerful ways with the Force help gain a victory, and after Qui-Gon's death in battle with Palpatine's initial apprentice Darth Maul (Ray Park), Obi-Wan convinces the Jedi Council to let him train the winning, but possibly unstable young prodigy. Whilst *The Phantom Menace* is the least effective of the six feature films to date in the series, it also clearly illustrates the uncool side of Lucas' obsessions in a way that also confirms their meaning to him. In its

first 40 minutes or so, the episode has a much more juvenile style and tone than the other films and is the one most clearly made with a young audience in mind. As much as this tone acts like nails on a chalkboard for older viewers, it's not actually a flaw in itself.

That said, Lucas had not personally directed a whole film in 22 years, and the one-time savant of '70s cinema had clearly grown stiff in the joints. Some parts of this revival are brilliantly executed, others weakly patched together. Early special-effects sequences in the episode are awkward and feel unfinished—particularly an underwater journey for the Jedi—and replete with edits that come a beat too late. The much-hyped, first-ever, completely computer-generated character in a feature film proved to be Jar Jar Binks (voiced by Ahmed Best), a floppy-eared, lizard-like alien from a

Naboo race called the Gungans who seems composed of a few hundred different comic-relief figures (and ethnic clichés) from old movies. I generally side with popular opinion here: Jar Jar is an annoying figure who nudges the material too close to the cartoonish, lacking the fierce-cute appeal of the often derided but lovable Ewoks. That said, although Jar Jar grates badly in early scenes, his involvement in a climactic battle through which he careens like Jerry Lewis trying to be Errol Flynn, bringing terror and destruction to both the enemy and his own fellow Gungans, blends comedy and action well in a sequence that calls out directly to a lot of classic swashbucklers, like Nick Cravat darting through danger in *The Crimson Pirate* (1953) or Herbert Mundin amidst the throng at the end of *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1938).

An extended subplot involving the substitution of the real Padmé, who pretends to be one of her own handmaidens behind a decoy, played by a very young Keira Knightley, means Portman and Knightley are forced into awkwardly imitating each other with a weird mid-Atlantic accent. But Padmé begins her evolution into perhaps the most interesting character in the franchise. She's a product of a culture with a curious predilection for being governed by emotionally and intellectually advanced young women, one who remains the voice of social and political wisdom in the trilogy and a gutsy fighter who has a tendency to leap into frays where others hesitate but who founders on her love for a younger, volatile man. The Ruritanian look of Naboo has a fervent and colourful charm, again clearly linking the instalment with the fantasy filmmaking of Lucas' youth like *Knights of the Round Table* (1954) or *Jack the Giant Killer* (1962). The core theme of the story is distrustful races coming together to fight a common enemy, as the humans of Naboo ally with Jar Jar's people, the Gungans. The last word spoken in the film is the Gungan king's (Brian Blessed) cry of "Peace!", contextualising the trilogy's developing story as a decline from a state of civilisation into a time of turmoil, ruction, and bloodshed. War comes not as great and appealing crusade or

assaults by conveniently abstract others, but because of the manipulations of cabals hoping to gain power or money. Images throughout the film of the Federation's war machines trammelling the lush, green beauty of Naboo introduce a recurring note of concern for the environment, nodding toward the same themes of natural purity and the insatiable ravening of sentience depicted in Wagner's *Das Rheingold*.

The core sequence, again often criticised but actually a terrific bit of filmmaking, comes when Qui-Gon manipulates events on Tatooine to allow him and his party to escape with young Anakin, which requires letting Anakin enter a dangerous form of competition known as the Pod Race. This sequence provides another evident reference to a movie that stands as distinct precursor to the *Star*

Wars series in both production grandeur and self-mythologising style, William Wyler's *Ben-Hur* (1959). Whereas the chariot race in that film was a climax, here the pod race actually inaugurates the essential *Star Wars* myth. It is the spectacle of something new and amazing coming into the world, and serves at least four purposes in dramatic context. In straight narrative terms, it solves the crisis of how the heroes will get off Tatooine and leads to Anakin joining their team. It's also an action set-piece that jolts the spluttering film to life. It focuses not just the story, but also the mythic element in the evolving epic tale as Anakin's great, courageous, already faintly berserk talent reveals itself for the first time. It also revives the panoramic aspect that's always been crucial to *Star Wars*, as tiny, enriching details flit by, from a bored Jabba the Hut overseeing the race and flicking bugs off his booth's ledge to vendors selling alien small fry to hungry viewers whilst the two-headed race caller mouths off with sarcastic glee. This sort of stuff is, to me, always a great part of the pleasure of Lucas' creation, a universe of recognisable things given a fantastic, slightly mocking but ultimately effusive makeover. Also, given how junky a lot of '90s action filmmaking looks today, this sequence is especially great in its clean and fluid use of widescreen, and the perfect legibility of the visual

grammar. But sequences like this sit cheek by jowl with awkward ones, like Anakin being teased by some fellow Tatooine waifs, where the style of acting and humour strays too far into a broad and juvenile place, like a Saturday morning children's show.

Climactic scenes of *The Phantom Menace* may push the kiddie wish-fulfilment a bit far as Anakin saves the day by blowing up a Trade Federation control ship to a chorus of applause. But the lightsaber duel between the Jedi and Darth Maul, which costs Qui-Gon's life and reveals Obi-Wan's gift for surprising pompous opponents, is in the best series tradition, and indeed perhaps can be said to re-found that tradition. *Attack of the Clones*, the first follow-up, is probably the most frustrating entry in the entire cycle. The episode encompasses some heavy lifting in the overall

narrative, depicting Anakin simultaneously as a brave and gallant knight who wields an almost unnerving romantic fixity in pursuing Padmé, but also harbouring a dangerously fraying psyche. This side to him, though sensed warily by the leading Jedi Yoda (Frank Oz) and Mace Windu (Samuel L. Jackson), is revealed when he returns to Tatooine looking for his mother Shmi (Pernilla August), only to find her on the edge of death after being kidnapped and tortured by humanoid nomads known as Sandpeople. Anakin, stirred to psychotic rage after Shmi expires in his arms, slaughters a whole village of them. The monster within Anakin is hatching, byproduct of both his alienated and exploited youth and the process of becoming a Jedi, a process that was supposed to ennoble and cleanse him of such evil. Anakin confesses his act to Padmé, alternating shows of rage, adolescent petulance, grief, and bewildered self-reprehension. Padmé, resisting her own ardour for the handsome warrior, nonetheless acquiesces to and covers up his lunacy.

Parts of *Attack of the Clones* have a romantic grandeur that easily match the best moments in any other episodes and strike at the heart of the appeal of this universe. The film starts effectively with a noirish sequence depicting an assassination attempt on Padmé that kills one of her doubles, a moment that signals immediately that the kiddie games of *The Phantom Menace* are over. Anakin and Padmé kissing before being wheeled out for a death match before a stadium full of insect men is a moment carved out of the very ore of the fantasy epic. The climactic battle sequences, including a tribute to Ray Harryhausen as our heroes battle a trio of monsters, the Jedi finally depicted at their best as they rally to save our heroes and fight off an army of robots, and Yoda and Dooku meeting in a lightsaber duel, are great entertainment, gathering a rolling, rollicking intensity. The landscapes on display are a diorama of fetish points for space opera and classic scifi—robots, aliens, Art Deco supercities, technogothic castles, glistening chrome space ships, and stygian automated factories, as if decades of *Amazing Stories* and *Astounding* magazine covers have come to life. Mixed

in with this are references to the ’50s pop culture beloved of Lucas, like diners and hot-rod-like speeders and spacecraft, making for the deepest immersion in the fantasy world Lucas had created.

But the episode is also beset by a baggy narrative that wastes screen time when it should be developing the tortured romance of Anakin and Padmé, whose affair unfolds in settings straight out of Pre-Raphaelite art. Instead we’re lumped with a couple of action scenes that come across more as show reels for the increasingly good digital effects or blueprints for computer games, like an asteroid field chase and a sequence in a droid assembly plant that is well-done and has a certain thematic force by portraying our heroes trying not to be more literally stamped out by a heedlessly working machine, but could easily have been left out. Some

sequences even stir thrills and a touch of exasperation at the same time, like the early chase sequence through the planetwide city of Coruscant. Wisely, Lucas reduced Jar Jar to a handful of cameos here, as a malleable political stand-in for Padmé, whilst the reliable duo of C3-P0 (Anthony Daniels) and R2-D2 (Kenny Baker) are turned to for comic relief, though the pair don't wield the importance or sharpness of humour they had in the original trilogy. For all its flaws, though, *Attack of the Clones* is a vigorous, fun, substantial work. Many of the best moments, odd for such a piece of big filmmaking, tend to be tossed-off asides: Obi-Wan using a Jedi mind trick on a barroom drug dealer, Anakin playing Joe Friday with bar patrons, bounty hunter Jango Fett (Temuera Morrison) spinning his blaster like a gunslinger after shooting down a Jedi, C3-P0 having a killer droid head welded onto his body, and the sight of Anakin speeding across the Tattooine landscape on a futuristic motorcycle like the Wild One gone Zen Ronin.

A great part of the appeal of the original series lay in the relatively broad simplicity of its heroes, who stood for clear, easily graspable, positive values. Even Han Solo, the slightly tarnished wiseguy uneasily elevated to crusader status, is hardly a Dostoyevsky character. The characters did evolve, but only Luke really deepened, and his journey from fresh-faced farm boy, an obvious avatar for the audience's fantastic yearnings, to grim inheritor of cosmic destiny, bore most of the real dramatic and mythic weight. By comparison, the prequels force one to empathise with a callow budding psychopath, his enabling lover, and his emotionally constipated mentor. These three protagonists each aid in causing the destruction of the world they think they're defending. The prequels depict a world falling apart and tellingly refuse to let the audience off the hook, no matter how distanced or naïf the rendering of that hook: almost everything the audience wants to see is bound up in this decay. The desire to see action is sated, but immediately indicted by Yoda as proof of failure. The romance of Anakin and Padmé slips its bonds, but signals impending doom for both. The daydream sustained in the original trilogy is therefore

critiqued and inverted.

Much as older viewers couldn't relate to Anakin, many kids and teens did. His deeply egotistical and painfully self-castigating sense of having his potential thwarted and his need for control foiled, and Padmé's optimism waning into an increasingly detached cynicism towards the political process she stands for, depict states of mind all too prolific in our time, ones that contradict common, conflicting expectations loaded upon young people, to be incredible achievers and unswervingly empathetic idealists all at once. "Only a Sith talks in absolutes," Obi-Wan warns Anakin as he turns to the dark side. At the time, some took this for a tilt at the rhetoric of George W. Bush, as much as it now sounds like a thumbnail sutra explaining the powerful appeal of groups like Islamic State for some—the

promise of complete surrender to a simple cause, a pure mode of thought for which any act can be countenanced. In this regard, Lucas clearly had his pulse on something other populist filmmakers have tried to grasp but usually belaboured. What is also clear to me is that Lucas, when he revisited this material, wanted to try to live within in it on a much deeper level than the original films and pay truer heed to the material's partial roots in the medieval mythos, both Eastern and Western, where lives were lived and death was met according to rather different value systems. The famous title card of every episode declares that this is all "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away…," but this fairytale motif only really feels true with the prequels. The original films are a charmingly bratty revolution fantasy, where the good guys happen to speak like '70s American teens and the bad guys have English accents. The prequels are a tragic contemplation of the forces that tear societies, and individuals, to pieces. Lucas' interest in a chillier, headier brand of scifi parable was obvious right from *THX 1138* and here found further articulation.

This quality emerges strongly in the last film of the trilogy, *Revenge of the Sith*, where Palpatine's attempts to win over Anakin resemble at once a seduction, therapy session, and a chess match of moral relativism. In the original trilogy, evil was, like in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, an elixir that once tasted was totally subsuming. In the prequel trilogy, both the light and the dark sides are more processes of thought and ways of feeling: by the time he becomes Darth Vader, Anakin is convinced he's bringing peace and justice to the realm. A constant leitmotif to the prequels is a sense of ethical questioning and a tension between the personal and the political that ultimately destroys both the Jedi and Anakin by pulling them in asymmetrical directions. Yoda warns young Anakin about maintaining attachments and giving himself cause for fear, and it's precisely this that ultimately leads him straight into Palpatine's arms. But the Jedi, presented as uncomplicated paragons whose aura is legendary in the original series, are here revealed as gallant but also demanding and elitist, almost incomprehensible to

someone who runs on emotion as much as Anakin and perhaps ultimately too detached from the fate of the Republic to actually save it in part because of their own ethic of accepting loss.

Lucas shows he understands something vital about courtly sagas and classical tragedy: the requirements of role and the nature of humanity are disparate and demanding things. Lucas literalises the tension key to the prequels between role and person early on with Padmé's absurd regalia, a crushing weight of stately role that continues to stand like a statue even when she's entirely outside of it. Jar Jar actually serves a fairly analogous role here as Han Solo did to the original films, if much less successfully, as a character who remains oblivious to the pretences of the civilised and the imposing ("Maxi big the Force!"). His clumsiness is the very

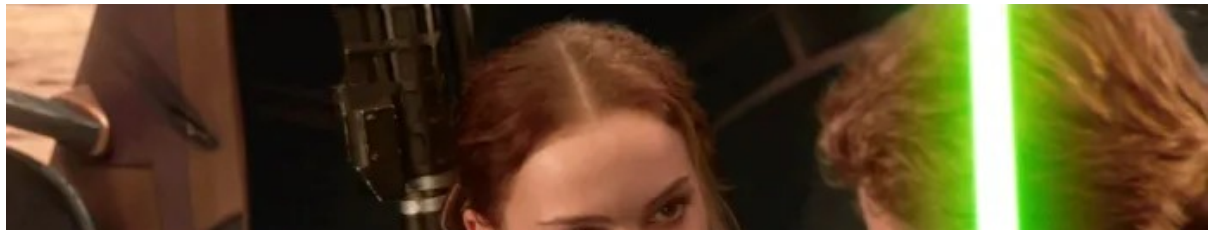
opposite to the ideal of disciplined self-abnegation that defines the Jedi and also the fetishism of power and order that defines the Sith.

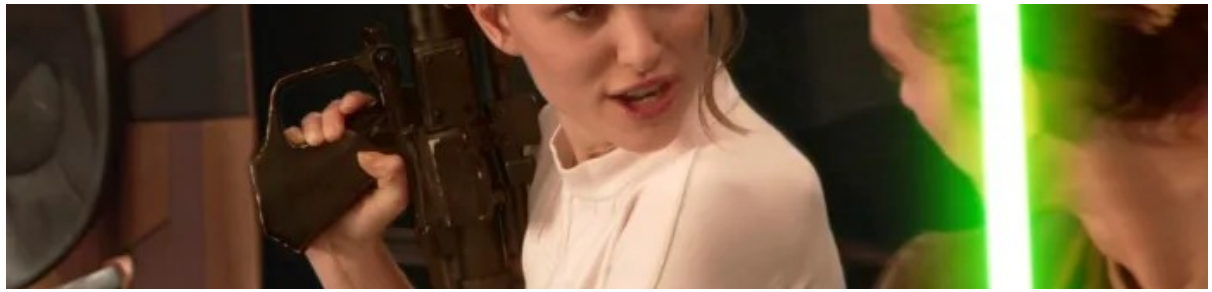
The writing of the prequels is often criticised, but what this brings up is just exactly what is good writing in such a context? Is it the writing of, say, Joss Whedon, where everyone, no matter where they come from, speaks like a smart-aleck English major in a Californian college, or the brick-heavy koans of Christopher Nolan? That famous quote of Howard Hawks about the trouble working out how a Pharaoh should talk for *Land of the Pharaohs* (1955) (“I don’t know how a Pharaoh talks. And Faulkner didn’t know. None of us knew.”) is still relevant in this regard. Lucas tries, a bit archly but with some purpose, to recreate the flavour of a certain brand of courtly poeticism in speech through the prequels, with a texture on

occasion that strives for the flavour of medieval epics— romantic, stylised, high-flown to the point of sounding like *recitative*. Lucas himself compared it to a kind of a rhythmic sound effect—a fair description. There's a much-mocked line in *Attack of the Clones* when Anakin and Padmé share a romantic interlude by the side of a lake. Padmé remembers days of joy swimming and lying on the sand with an old boyfriend, and Anakin feebly jokes how much he hates sand. It is an uncomfortable moment, but deliberately so: Anakin tries to shrug aside a hint of romantic jealousy with humour, but accidentally reveals a hole in his soul, as he's actually talking about his childhood on a planet where sandstorms were dangerous and life was hard, a place to which he will soon return. Characterisation, backstory, foreshadowing. Not so bad for a dumb joke about sand.

That’s not to cover up the many dud line readings in the prequels, most of which are perplexing as they could’ve been salvaged with a few hours’ dedicated ADR work. It’s definitely true that Lucas accomplishes his aims better with images than words. An iconic shot in *Attack of the Clones* depicting Anakin regarding the dawn and trying to calm his raw nerves with Padmé hovering in the wings, and the final shot of the same film where the pair get married in the rays of a setting sun, have a transfixing, totemic beauty. Lucas’ formal gifts are, in fact, often greatly in evidence throughout the series, particularly his interest in wide shots replete with geometries that highlight the formalism that defines this age in his fantastical world and the tension about to bust it to pieces.

I think the style is quite deliberate and suits the tone of the material, and is also modulated with a deliberation many didn't notice, moving from the pantomime-like tone of the opening episode to high operatic drama in the last. But the emphasis on a tense decorum in this futuristic (albeit past) world leaves Portman and Christensen often seeming far more out of place than their predecessors ever did. Christensen, whose chief claim to fame was playing a troubled young misfit on the TV series *Higher Ground* before Lucas cast him, is one of the most vexing elements of the triptych. Lucas clearly wanted a James Dean-Marlon Brando quality to Anakin, his generational touchstones for rebellious youth and social disaffection, a touch of the immature as well as the fearsome to his asocial side. If Christensen was irredeemably bad, he could simply be allowed to fade into the texture of the films like human wallpaper. But Christensen delivers on occasion, as in the scene when Anakin tells Padmé about the massacre of the Sandpeople: he grasps the degree to which Anakin is composed of alternating repression and inchoate eruption, nobility and monstrosity.





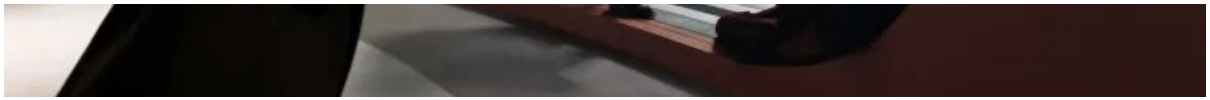
Plummy old pros like McDiarmid, Jackson, and Oz fit into this landscape better. McGregor acquits himself well enough in the series, an achievement considering he had a difficult job in matching his younger, pithier version of Obi-Wan to Alec Guinness' quiet and assured characterisation. Although he and Christensen have the athleticism, in some ways Portman strikes me as the natural adventurer of the three young stars, dashing about firing ray guns with delighted eyes; her "I call it aggressive negotiations" quip in *Attack of the Clones* is pure swashbuckle. Another noteworthy performance comes from August, who does a terrific job securing the drama in the spectacle of a mother bereft of her son; the reunion in *Attack of the Clones* has an unusual pathos because the dying woman is transfixed by the sight of her grown son.

At its best, the prequel trilogy legitimately inhabits the realm of chivalric romance, stocked with themes and stances found in sagas, particularly in the traits that define Anakin, who's actually much closer to a great mythic hero like Achilles, Jason, or Siegfried than Luke ever was in the violence and intensity of his driving emotions and character stances—forbidden love, crippling conflict between stoic integrity and hysterical eruption, an inability to settle into required strictures of life in the society he represents. Obi-Wan was originally presented as a mentor figure whose initially uncomplicated call to action for Luke was revealed in subsequent instalments to have more dimensions, but he still remained a figure of sagacious wisdom. McGregor plays him as a dashing, but serious-minded warrior-monk who retains a telling and ultimately calamitous blind spot when it comes to Anakin, his pupil and adopted brother, an emotional substitute for the lost father figure of Qui-Gon. This fantasy world is a kind of Eden from which everyone falls, giving birth to a different time and throwing up rogues like Han

and Lando Calrissian (Billy Dee Williams).

Many of Lucas' reference points for creating his mythos were pretty disreputable, including not just the classy art of Alex Raymond's *Flash Gordon* comics but the vulgarity of their screen serial adaptations. A wealth of other reference points is apparent—the swashbucklers of Michael Curtiz, the conceptual richness of Frank Herbert's *Dune* novels and the venturesome absurdity of Edgar Rice Burroughs, the sweep of John Ford's western mythology and the rigorous formality of Akira Kurosawa's samurai epics, and Ray Harryhausen's films, which combined ingenious wonders with the ropy charms of B-movies. On the highest level, Lucas has often seemed an acolyte of Cecil B. DeMille, whose embrace of scale and riotous colour as aesthetic tools matched the themes of world-

shaping powers with *The Ten Commandments* (1956), and of Fritz Lang, who laid the groundwork for much of the style of Lucas' works with his silent epics *The Spiders* (1919), *Dr. Mabuse, the Gambler* (1922), *Die Nibelungen* (1924), and *Metropolis* (1926)—fantastical pieces of world-building replete with similarly surreal and cavernous environs, action cliffhangers, and stories often split across multiple episodes. Coruscant turns *Metropolis*' soaring modernist architecture into an entire world. There's more than a hint of *Die Nibelungen* (both movie and source myth, quite apart from Wagner's take) in the recurring images of crushing courtly stature and state, infernal downfall and baleful regard. Palpatine sitting at the centre of all plots is the ultimate Mabuse, manipulating the downfall of others for personal amusement, reducing government to a matter of his own will and detecting the weak points of Anakin's psyche to turn him into a helpless acolyte.



The political substance of the series is a mishmash of historical motifs, blending a parable for the Roman Empire, the Crusades, the American Revolutionary War and Civil War, and World War II, complete with space Nazis and galactic paladins. But the prequels contain a consistent thread of real interest in the idea of what constitutes the self and society, diagnosing cynicism as a problem that's as pernicious as corruption. The original trilogy only seemed to reference contemporary politics by evoking a generational anxiety of becoming what the '60s counterculture rebelled against, as Luke tried to avoid becoming his father, whilst the battles of the Ewoks uncomfortably suggested an odd hijacking and inversion of the Vietnam experience. The prequels suggest a more immediate and clarified lesson. "So this is how freedom dies," Padmé murmurs at one point when the Senate votes to make Palpatine Emperor, "With thunderous applause." *Revenge of the Sith*, the concluding movie in the trilogy, has a rueful warning for younger generations of how easy it is to be so subsumed when your leaders manipulate you to commit evil in the name of good, with Anakin, youth and talent personified, seduced by promises of power and privilege, called to commit slaughter in the name of peace, to be delivered

from fear and frustration. Anakin's urge to free himself from fear also detaches him from democracy, making him lean toward authoritarianism, the get-things-done attitude of Palpatine.

One of the most obviously powerful qualities of the series since its inception has always been John Williams' scoring, and perhaps the most inarguably strong aspect of the prequels is his music, particularly the "Duel of the Fates" piece used in *The Phantom Menace*, the lush "Across the Stars" motif in *Attack of the Clones*, and the thunderous drums and choral works resounding throughout *Revenge of the Sith*. The prequels sport a few nods to the original trilogy that are perhaps excessively cute—having C3-PO prove to have been an engineering project of young Anakin's, making Boba Fett's father Jango the genetic source of all the initial wave of clone

Imperial Stormtroopers. But there are also some refined and intelligible touches of foreshadowing and mirroring throughout, particularly in Anakin's two duels with Count Dooku, which mimic cinematic effects and story patterning in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983) in suggesting the same forces of fate and divergence of character that define fathers and sons, masters and pupils. *Revenge of the Sith* signals the closing bookend to the trilogy in echoing *Episode VI – Return of the Jedi*, as Palpatine's plots reach climax, the Jedi are wiped out, and Anakin begins a precipitous transformation into that darkest of dark marauders, Darth Vader.

Frankly, *Revenge of the Sith* is the best of the *Star Wars* films, a grandiose distillation of the entire concept of space opera scifi, the

closest the series has come yet to fulfilling its neo-Wagnerian streak. It's also the tightest, most dynamic piece of filmmaking, a narrative inexorable in the same way as *A New Hope*, except on a downward trajectory, successfully carrying through a promise to turn into high tragedy. Elements that had problems connecting and synchronising in the first two films snap into gear here— even Christensen is fairly okay—if at the relative expense of some aspects, including Padmé, as the dashing figure she cut in the first two instalments is here reduced to mere weepy baby mama, for the most part. The opening sequence is a marvel that shows how far special effects advanced even in the six years since the trilogy began, and unfolds as a pure episode of swashbuckling action, as Anakin and Obi-Wan try to rescue Palpatine, who's been kidnapped by Dooku and cyborg rebel leader General Grievous. Anakin defeats Dooku this time and kills him at the chancellor's behest, and finishes up having to pilot a massive crashing spaceship in for a neat landing. This whole sequence is a piece of cinema spectacle I don't think anyone's topped in the last 10 years. *Revenge of the Sith* alternates the urge to such kinetic release and intense, yet quiet, almost cerebral sequences where the characters grope their way through their contradictory impulses and collapsing

worldviews.

Another very large reason I like these films is that they reject nearly every modish trick of so much contemporary filmmaking. As modern, perhaps excessively so, as the digital special effects seemed upon release, the actual cinematic design of the films is rich and classical in utilising the screen's expanse, and those much-quibbled-over effects, sometimes gorgeous and sometimes cheesy, offer to me a quality like the painted wonders of old matte effects – not realistic, but transportive on some level. There's scarcely a single too-tightly-framed shot or jerky camera moment in all seven hours of the filmmaking here. Lucas' trademark Kurosawan screen wipes nudge visual and narrative structure along with fluidic insistence. I'll also admit I have a liking for aspects of these films

from which others recoil. I enjoy Lucas' happy embrace of the kind of outsized, old-fashioned melodrama and idealization usually filtered out of modern tent-pole films where the cult of awesome has a very narrow range of definition; the scenes of Anakin and Padmé swooning in the fields of Naboo, which have a resplendent, flower-child goofiness to them, and Vader's final, over-the-top cry of "NO!" are big, gregarious middle fingers turned up at the middling, sometimes nonexistent emotional range of most of Lucas' inheritors. *Revenge of the Sith* concludes the move away from the kid-friendly tone of *The Phantom Menace*, as here the young Jedi are butchered en masse by Anakin amidst a night of long light sabers. Marching ranks of Stormtroopers invade the Jedi temple, and Anakin heads to the planet Mustafar to wipe out the separatist leaders, including Nute Gunray, now that Palpatine no longer needs them.

Lucas' direction, which grows more vigorous and animated throughout the trilogy, cuts loose in this movement, replete with delirious high viewpoints of marching armies, cross-cut glimpses of myriad alien worlds where other Jedi are betrayed and ambushed, and the churning violence Anakin turns on his enemies, carving up the separatists with a savagery that's quite unmatched in the whole six-film cycle. The finale of *Sith*, at once paving the way for the next cycle of history and underlining the total collapse of everything depicted as sacrosanct and worthy in the previous three films, sees Obi-Wan and Anakin battling over Padmé's crumpled, pregnant form on a volcanic planet where the spuming lava flows mimic the emotional landscape of the characters and the action unfolds in gloriously hyperbolic manner. Molten rock erupts, sparks fly, light sabers streak and slash, colossal machines fall apart and melt. The mimetic quality of Lucas' creation is at its most unrestrained and beautiful here: I'm not sure if mainstream cinema had seen its like since the days of DeMille, or Powell and Pressburger, whose *Black Narcissus* (1946) and *The Red Shoes* (1948) similarly paint obsession and jealousy, love and hate, in bold tones of bloody red and dancelike motion and vertiginous danger.

Lucas does grant concessions to the remnant heroic ideal at the heart of the series. Yoda gives the newly crowned Emperor a bit of what-for before fleeing in the face of the crushing political machine the Sith now wields, and Obi-Wan quite literally cuts Anakin's legs from under him when the young, increasingly mad tyro overreaches and underestimates his opponent. The concluding scenes take the cross-cutting structure to a striking place as two different kinds of death and birth are contrasted—the waning life-force of Padmé even as she struggles to give birth to the crucial Dioscuri of the next epoch, Luke and Leia, matched with the reconstruction of the mangled and pathetic Anakin into the monstrous form of Darth Vader. There's a perverse and gruelling quality to these scenes that, again, defined new territory for a series once based in mere

boyish adventure. The themes of rebirth, cycles and family, decay and renewal, conclude in images of funeral, as Padme is celebrated in death by Naboo, and homecoming, with Leia finding a home with Senator Organa (Jimmy Smits) and his wife. But the very last shot inevitably returns to that most memorable image of *A New Hope*, as young Luke is held by his aunt and uncle (Joel Edgerton and Bonnie Maree Piesse) as they gaze out on the twin suns of Tatooine, the future with its horrors and glories a distant promise.